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## The Biology Curator

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pleted "Head for the Hills" gallery featuring Highland wildlife, were affected by smoke and falling debris, while the temporary exhibition gallery, fortuitously empty for an exhibition change over, took the brunt of the blast from an exploding gas canister – tar was found embedded in the far wall! Finally, the roof itself, especially the ornamental glazed dome, suffered extensive damage.

The City of Dundee District Council is committed to fully reinstate the building, but the repairs and hopefully also some modest upgrading will be a lengthy process. Barrack Street Museum is not expected to reopen to the public until early in 1995.

#### PEOPLE

Ray Barnett has written in with an update on the new structure at Bristol Museums. In January last the two curatorial sections of Geology and Natural History were united within a single Natural Sciences Section. Ray was appointed from Assistant Curator (Natural History) to be Senior Curator, Natural Sciences. Shortly afterwards Anne Hollowell (previously Curator, Natural History) was appointed curator, Biology and Peter Crowther (previously Curator, Geology) and Roger Clark (previously assistant Curator, Geology) were both appointed as Curators of Geology. Phillipa Burrell (previously Museums Assistant) was appointed Centre Manager of the Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre. All existing staff were retained despite the re-organisation, and Phillipa's position considerably improved. Bristol is still suffering from severe under-funding for such a large service, but, in the present economic climate, that does not appear to be a unique position.

#### DIARY DATES

**Oct 17-19 1994.** MDA Standards Workshop, Portsmouth. Practical sessions on the new UK Documentation Standard 'Spectrum' will include sessions on the life sciences. Details from MDA, Cambridge, tel 0223 242848

**Oct 19 1994.** Evening meeting of the Society for the History of Natural History at the Natural History Museum. Talks on Robert Mylne's geological map of London, historically important herbaria in the NHM and the entomology manuscript collection at the NHM. All welcome.

**Oct 22 1994.** Malacological

Pioneers. One day meeting at the Linnean Society. Flyer enclosed.

**Oct 26 1994.** Bones. The BCG autumn meeting to be held at Stoke on Trent. Members will be mailed direct with further details. Any offers of papers to the BCG Chairman please. Address below.

**Nov 2-6 1994.** BCG Study trip to Holland. Any late bookings to the Treasurer please. You'll be really sorry if you miss it! Just think of all the boring post-visit chat "In Amsterdam ..." Remember Madrid and be there if you can.

**Nov 30-Dec 1 1994.** GCG Seminar, AGM and field trip: The geological display – new directions in interpretation. National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. Details from Tom Sharpe (tel 0222 397951 x265).

**Jan 25 1995.** Half day SHNH meeting on Sir Hans Sloane at the Jamaican High Commission, London

**April 19-21.** International conference on the value and valuation of natural science collections, Manchester. Second circular now available. Contact Charles Pettitt (address below). So far there have been over 150 replies to the first circular from 24 countries with offers of over 30 papers.

#### WANTED

Dorete Bloch at the Zoological Department of the Museum of Natural History, FR-100 Torshavn, Faroe Islands is seeking information on the whereabouts of specimens of the extinct Faroese, White-Speckled morph Raven, *Corvus corax varius* Brunnich, the last of which were seen in the Faroes in 1902, 1916 and 1948. The last specimens obtained for European museum collections at the turn of the last century. There are known specimens in Copenhagen (6) and Leiden (1) but various publications refer to specimens in London, Liverpool and Tring as well as in private collections on the continent. Any information on extant specimens to the address above please.

Mr Ian Anstruther is trying to trace a collection of snakes brought over from India circa 1857 by Dr John Collis Browne of 'Chlorodyne' fame and given to an unknown museum. Please forward any information to Mr Anstruther at Barlavington Estate, Petworth, Sussex, GU28 0LG.

After a distinctly shaky start the UK Systematics Forum is getting down to work. This new initiative is funded by

the Office of Science and Technology and its primary role is to promote co-ordination and communication amongst institutions with major biological and palaeontological collections as well as the wider systematic community, and to develop priorities for systematic work. The creation of a Directory of Current UK Systematic Expertise and Research is considered to be an important first step in strengthening the discipline of systematics. The information collated in this directory will be made available to interested parties and used as a tool to inform governmental policy makers of the current situation in systematic research – a role made possible by the Forum's links with OST. Anyone in the UK currently involved in systematic research whether at an amateur or professional level, biological or palaeontological, is strongly urged to contact the forum for inclusion in this important information source. For more information contact: E.Watson, UK Systematics Forum, FREEPOST (LON 91), c/o The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5YZ. Tel 071 938 9522.

#### NATURAL SCIENCES IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS

The creation of a completely new, permanent curatorial post in the field of natural history is something of a rarity these days, when many larger museum authorities have frozen existing posts when vacant. However, three years ago the combined efforts of Roxburgh District Council, Scottish Museums Council and the Borders Museum Forum successfully managed to reverse this worrying trend and create a new post within Roxburgh District Council in the Scottish Borders.

The undoubted commitment of these Authorities to the care of natural science collections in the Borders is based on the 1986 Museums and Galleries Commission report "Museums in Scotland" – the so-called Miles Report. This document identified large geographical areas in Scotland where natural science collections had no specialist staff to curate them for many years, if at all. The report recommended the appointment of trained natural history curators, on a shared basis if necessary, to cover these areas and to enhance the care and use of these collections whilst also adding to their number and the valuable information they hold.



Having started the post in October, 1991 and spent some time assessing the collections in the Borders, the first task was to write a comprehensive five year Development Plan to structure and coordinate forward progress. This document has since proved to be invaluable both in support of any grant aid applications and in providing a seemingly endless work programme. The main remits of the post include the management of collections and subsequent research and publication where possible; the creation of an interpretive strategy to include the provision of new, permanent natural history displays and touring exhibitions for the Borders; the creation of a Biological Records Centre for the Borders using Recorder software; and a development of environmental education in conjunction with the Borders Environmental Education Forum.

This remit is much the same as that of most other natural history curators except for a specific element of income generation involving project work for the other three District Councils in the Borders. This initially took the form of collections and interpretive strategy formulation on their behalf followed by a scheduled implementation of suggested projects over a period of the first few years. Income from these sources, as well as from grant aid and income from a touring exhibition, has totalled about £25,000 in less than three years, a situation which rests quite well with elected members!

The collections at Hawick Museum, the base for the natural sciences in the Borders, is the usual small, old Antiquarian Society/local authority museum mixture of old taxidermy mounts, a small number of named Lepidoptera collections in various conditions, a small herbarium, a number of egg cabinets, a mixed geological collection, and an assemblage of single specimens/artefacts of varying origins. The level of data with specimens is, at best, mixed: most of the Victorian geology has no provenance, the Lepidoptera collections have no data on the pins and the collection has been shuffled slightly in the past, whilst the herbarium has fairly good data, as does some of the smaller collections e.g. antique wooden salmon models.

The initial rationalisation of these collections involved the completion of a programme of disposal of extremely poor quality/condition taxidermy, whilst also employing our local taxidermist to produce extremely high quality mounts to gradually replace some of the 60-70% of the taxidermy collection which has been destroyed. The remaining specimens have been cleaned and repaired for use with schools and temporary displays.

New specimens from the Border Taxidermy Studios in Hawick provided an excellent opportunity to create Roxburgh District Museums' first touring exhibition in the form of an exhibition on the history, value to conservation and the artistic merits of taxidermy – "Nature Preserved". This has been touring the Borders museums for 18 months and is now touring Scotland until early 1995, all the while generating a modest income, part of which has been invested in the production of another touring display on angling.

This second exhibition has been created as part of a Borders-wide strategy to interpret the River Tweed, one of the largest, cleanest and best salmon waters in the country. Entitled "Where's the Catch?", the display is aimed at non anglers in an attempt to explain why those of us who are afflicted with this sporting madness spend vast amounts of time, energy and money apparently achieving very little. It explores the obvious hunter/control of nature/ love of the countryside/ historical traditions of the sport against a backdrop of the Tweed and will tour some of the museums in the Region.

Routine documentation and cataloguing work revealed that the herbarium, largely Borders and Northumberland material, was collected in part by Sir Walter Elliot, a local Laird, who spent 40 years in India sending crates of specimens and cultural artefacts back to the new Archaeological Society and museum in the 1860's. Further research has shown that his expertise was not limited to a good aim with a shotgun, but extended to numismatics and Hindu religion, subjects upon which he wrote definitive texts.

This research has informed the creation of a new permanent gallery – a re-creation of a Victorian gentleman's study – which looks broadly at the development of natural history from the times of Columbus and, more specifically, at the growth of the Hawick Archaeological Society and the contributions made to its progress by Sir Walter. Scottish Natural Heritage gave a generous 50% grant

towards the gallery which opened in April this year. As well as interpreting the museum's collections of natural and cultural artefacts and providing a wealth of educational possibilities, this gallery acts as a prelude to a conservation gallery planned to open later next year which will bring the story of natural history in Roxburgh up to date.

Computer listing of the contents of this same herbarium has allowed the production of county species lists to be sent to BSBI Recorders who have found one or two interesting new records, whilst the Royal Botanic Gardens are now aware that their large collection of Indian plants from Sir Walter Elliot is complemented by specimens in Hawick Museum. Having finally received information from the last of the BSBI recorders, the production of a full catalogue and background report is now imminent.

The proposed role of Hawick Museum as a Local Records Centre for site and species data is also soon to be realised: Scottish Natural Heritage have given a grant towards the purchase of a database system, including map plotter and graphics scanner to facilitate the production of well presented output from the system. At the moment any input into the system is being delayed by the update of Recorder software by English Nature, although a Steering Committee has already been created to oversee the management of the Centre and verify dubious records. As soon as Recorder 3.2 is available the real work will start – there could be as many as 500,000 existing records spread around the Borders, all to be processed in conjunction with new data.

It is almost three years since this post was appointed and there is a tendency to feel that only a small dent has been made in the amount of work to be done... which, of course, is the nature of our profession: the more one does, the more one needs to do! It is gratifying, however, that other countryside organisations in the Borders have given their support to the continuing natural sciences work of the museum, and there are now many opportunities to contribute to regional strategies and initiatives in one of the most beautiful parts of the country.

Hopefully, the aims of the Miles Report in 1986 have been fulfilled, at least in part, and there is certainly enough work still to be done – enough for a lifetime. It remains to be seen



how issues such as Local Government reorganisation and the shift to a unitary authority will affect the operation of the museums in the Borders, but with some good fortune and a prevailing wind the task of curating, collecting, researching and interpreting the natural heritage of the Borders will continue for many years to come.

John Harrison  
Natural Sciences Officer  
Roxburgh District Museums Service

### Summary of Museums Association Meeting held in Doncaster

The aim was to establish a forum where the MA, federations and specialist groups could come together, perhaps two or three times a year, at different venues around the country. Discussion indicated that twice a year would be a reasonable aim, and the next meeting may be in Bristol later this year.

The meeting was in general quite interesting, and it is useful to be able to confront the MA directly. However one little hiccup concerned the notification of the specialist groups. Although all of us had received invitations, generally via our institutions, MA claimed that they had also gone to the specialist groups as well. In fact neither the chairs or the secretaries of the BCG or GCG appear to have received any such invitation, thus potentially leaving out the whole of the Natural Sciences curatorial community. A small issue perhaps, but one I hope would not be repeated. In fact, committee members from both groups were present at the meeting.

Stephen Locke spoke on the current situation at the MA and its plans for the future. He sees the role of the MA as being to raise the standards of museums, but a principle means to do that would be by the underwriting of professional standards. He stressed that the core values of the Association would be retained, but hoped the Association would become open to a wider range of applicants than at present, shop managers being a cited example.

This led onto the review of the membership structure, and in particular the way in which the applications for associateship were to be assessed. The aim was to make the assessment more rigorous and more relevant, while again opening up the areas of museum work that could be eligible. The gaining of the diploma as a prerequisite for asso-

ciate membership was to be removed, and assessment by portfolio and interview were proposed. The award would be made on the basis of both training and experience, with the ability to demonstrate a commitment to their institution as a museum. Thus associate membership would be given on the basis not only of what they had been trained to do, but also on what they had actually done. It was accepted that criteria would be difficult to define for some areas of museum work, and also that problems might arise with respect to those people who had been awarded this status under the older regulations.

Barbara Woroncow then said a little about the (possible) forthcoming local government review. The general impression seems to be that not enough is known or decided at present, so it is difficult to know what to do (*Only in England - Ed*). Some points were made. Particular problem areas were likely to be break up of county museum services, smaller museums with a wide remit (eg. The Yorkshire Museum), and pastoral care posts not based on any institution, (eg, Gloucestershire, Cumbria and Ryedale).

The MA were to make a statement of general principles, and to set up a working party to look at any potential problems. Letters had been sent out to those museums that look as though they might be at risk, but the response has so far been poor.

Brian Hayton gave some rule of thumb points for pragmatists:

- Know what you are doing.
- Ignore what voices on high are saying. They won't know any more than you.
- Don't assume it will be alright on the night. However don't assume all change is bad.
- Keep your masters happy.
- Know who your friends are and keep them.
- Make more friends.
- Find out who writes policy and talk to them.
- Blow your own trumpet. Run information campaigns.
- Stay in charge of your own situation.

Discussion indicated that many people were still very much in the dark. The MA will put more information in the Museums Journal.

Along with a certain amount of specialist discussion, there was one topic of more general relevance. Cathy Niblett gave a talk on the provision for

disabled people in museums. This will be covered in the next round of registration, and may be a requirement rather than an option. MAGDA have a range of documents designed to help people deal with problems of disabled access, and Cathy gave some guidelines on how to meet the minimum standards.

- Conduct a disability/access audit.
- Always work in consultation with disabled people.
- Look at all types of disability. Some may be less apparent than others.
- Establish a working party which includes disabled people.
- Draw up policy and a timetabled action plan. Have this endorsed by your governing body.
- Review your progress as part of your normal review procedures.
- Be grateful for criticism, and act on it.

Promote public support.

It remains to be seen how successful these meetings will be, but they have the potential to be a useful forum, doing interactively what is otherwise covered less effectively in the Journal. Steve Thompson, Scunthorpe Museum

### REVIEWS

Duckworth, W.D., Genoways, H.H. & Rose, C.L.

*Preserving Natural Science Collections: Chronicle of our Environmental Heritage*

National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property, Inc. 1993. 140pp. 25 photographs. 1 figure.

This publication is the result of a joint project between NIC, the Association of Systematics Collections and the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections. The publication consists of an executive summary (4pp); Chapter 1 - Significance and value of natural science collections (11pp); Chapter 2 - the scope and nature of the conservation challenge (13pp); Chapter 3 - Meeting the challenge - recommendations and strategies (14pp); Bibliography (38pp); Glossary of selected terms (16pp); Appendix A - natural science conservation training program (7pp); Appendix B - recommended topics for research and technology transfer (7pp); Appendix C - Project chronology (2pp); Appendix D - project participants and contributors (13pp); and Appendix E - Resolutions from the International Symposium and First World Congress on the Preservation